DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 888 SO 010 731

AUTHOR Altenbaugh, Richard J.; Faulstcr, Rolland G.
TITLE Work People's College: A Finnish Folk High School in the American Labor College Movement.
INSTITUTION Pittsburgh Univ., Pa. International and Development Education Program.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 26p.; Not available in hard copy from EDRS due to poor reproducibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Practice; English (Second Language); Higher Education; Human Development; Immigrants; *Labor Education; *Labor Unions; Language Fluency; Nonformal Education; Political Influences; Program Descriptions; Secondary Education; Social Change; *Socialism; United States History; *Values

ABSTRACT

American working class organizations' efforts since World War I to establish and control their own educational programs flourished during the 1920s and 1930s with the appearance of over 300 worker controlled colleges. An important forerunner of this movement was the Work People's College, created by socialist Finnish immigrants in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1907 as a Scandinavian type residential school for 42 students. Original objectives were to provide basic skills, help Finnish workers learn English, and, eventually, to train workers as teachers, editors, and socialist agitators. The curriculum, based upon the social sciences, stressed democratic ideology and cultivated class-consciousness. By 1913, the college served 157 students, employed eight instructors, and had expanded into a second building. Constant struggles between moderate and radical socialists for control of the college resulted in frequent changes in curriculum. By 1921 radicals had gained the upper hand and they stressed revolutionary unionism, direct action, sabotage, and general strikes instead of parliamentary socialism. When the college formally affiliated with the radical Industrial Workers of the World labor party (IWW) in 1921, it began to admit non-Finnish workers and lost much of its ethnic character. The college lost influence and enrollment and finally ceased operation in 1940. The college did, however, provide a model for labor college programs which were to develop in the 1930s, particularly Commonwealth College and Brookwood Labor College. The conclusion is that although the American Labor College Movement failed in its goal of social reconstruction, it produced graduates who contributed significantly to the American labor movement. (Author/DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED153888

FEB

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Rolland Paulston
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Work People's College: A Finnish Folk High School In the American Labor College Movement

by

Richard J. Altenbaugh

and

Rolland G. Paulston

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

International and Development Education Program
School of Education
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260

December 1977

DRAFT MS.

SP 010 731

Introduction

The emergence of workers' education, i.e., efforts by working-class organizations to establish and control their own educational programs, first took place around the turn of the century in Great Britain and Scandinavia. After World War I, the idea crossed the Atlantic and during the 1920's and 1930's the American Labor College Movement flourished with the appearance of over 300 worker-controlled colleges."[1]

In attempts to explain the origins, programs, and contributions of these autonomous U. S. education institutions, a number of writers and scholars have stressed the Anglo nexus. Such British experiences as Ruskin College (1899), the Worker's Educational Association (1903), and interalia the National Council of Labor Colleges (1921) have been seen as the most formative precursors of the American Worker's Education Movement.

While British influence has been unquestionably important, we would argue that contributions from other areas have been neglected. Influences from German Socialism, for example, on workers' education in the Jewish-American community have been extensive and formative--but little studied.[2] In like manner in the American Scandinavian and Finnish communities, Scandinavian models have been imported and adapted but not studied.

In this paper we will examine the Work People's College, one of these institutions where the Scandinavian inheritance first loomed large, and then faded as the Industrial Workers of the World fought the college and used it in their struggle for a socialist America. We will first note how Finnish immigrants sought to create a folk high school or residential school

---

[1] Richard Dwyer, "Workers' Education, Labor Education, Labor Studies: An Historical Delinqation," Review of Educational Research, 47 (1977), p. 180. See also Marius Hansome, World Workers' Educational Movements: Their Social Significance (1931; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 492; Dagmar Schultz, "The Changing Political Nature of Workers' Education: A Case Study of the Wisconsin School for Workers" (Unpub. diss.: University of Wisconsin, 1972), p. 16. Frank Adams, Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair Publishing, 1975), p. 15.

for young adults modeled along Scandinavian lines. We will then briefly compare Work Peoples' College with several other worker's colleges and assess something of its contribution to the overall worker's college movement.

This task will be accomplished, first, by exploring workers' education in Finland during the early years of the 20th Century in order to establish the workers' education heritage of the Finns. Second, the sources, purposes, programs, achievements, and outcomes of Work Peoples' College will be described. And, third, Work People's College will be compared and contrasted with two well-known American labor colleges, Brookwood Labor College and Commonwealth Labor College, to determine the significance, if any, of the Finnish contribution to the American workers' education experience.

Workers' Education in Finland

Workers' education began in Finland in 1899--the same year as the creation of Ruskin College in England--with the development of the Workers' Institute. Organized by the Finnish labor movement, the school functioned "to spread intellectual and moral enlightenment among the broad masses."[3] Although supposedly founded to benefit the Finnish working-class, the Institute eschewed radical political ideology by serving broad educational goals. The Institute achieved considerable success and by the late 1920's some 40 Institutes had been built throughout the urban centers of Finland. Helsinki claimed the largest enrollment with 6,000 members.[4] Held in the evening, classes included courses in the "social sciences, public speaking, practical writing and arithmetic, the history and language of Finland...."[5]

---

[2] See, for example, N. Levin, Jewish Socialist Movements: 1877-1917. (New York: Schocken Books, 1977) 554 p.; I. Frank, "European Socialism and Jewish-American Worker Education." (Pittsburgh: International and Development Education Program, 1974) 63 p.; and R. G. Paulston, Folk Schools in Social Change (Pittsburgh: University Center for International Studies, 1974) 194 p.

3 Quoted in Hansome, p. 364.

4 Ibid., p. 366.

5. Ibid., p. 365.

In 1919, the Workers' Educational Federation began to disseminate "social education among the masses by means of study circles, lecture courses, libraries," and correspondence courses. The WEF received widespread, popular support from 18 national organizations, such as the Social Democratic Party and the Trade Union Federation of Finland, with a total of 430,000 members.[6] Moreover, by 1928, the WEF claimed 342 study circles which served 4,462 students in the rural regions of Finland.[7] The course offerings of the WEF closely paralleled those of the Workers' Institute, but the WEF also provided a course in the history of socialism. Thus, unlike the Institute, the WEF did not exclude radical ideology from its curriculum.

The Workers' Academy, a residential folk high school for labor students, developed in 1924 near Helsinki. With more specific and radical goals than the Workers' Institute and the WEF, the Academy aimed

> . . . to equip intellectually active worker students for responsible offices in the important workers' movements--the trade unions, the socialist party, the cooperatives, the workers' education movement, and for governmental and public functions.[8]

The students, generally in their twenties, came exclusively from working-class families. The Academy's program offered four divisions: Social-Political Sciences; Natural Sciences; Humanistic Studies; and Practical Subjects. The Social-Political Sciences track included labor legislation, trade unionism, the Finnish labor movement, and political economy as courses while the Practical Subjects contained the Finnish language, public speaking, and bookkeeping.[9]

---

6 Ibid., p. 367.

7 Ibid., p. 368.

8 Ibid., p. 370.

9 Ibid., pp. 371-2.

Overall, workers' education in Finland was diverse and successful. On the one hand, the Workers' Institute and the WEF fostered educational goals with a broad program and, thereby, fulfilled many intellectual needs of urban and rural Finns. The Workers' Academy, on the other hand, adhered to social aims and trained working-class students for leadership roles in the Finnish Labor Movement.

Work Peoples' College

Although Finns settled along the Delaware early in the Colonial Era, Finnish migration to the U. S. remained low until the Russian army began to draft Finns in 1900. For example, while only 3,500 Finns emigrated to America in 1898, over 23,000 fled Finland in 1902.[10] "These refugees, draft resistors among them, included liberals as well as socialists, intellectuals as well as workers."[11] Russian suppression of the 1905 general strike in Finland, which protested Russian rule, and the 1906 Viapori rebellion caused a second wave of Finnish radicals to escape to the United States:

> They represented the "new left" in European socialism: the post-1905 radicalism that had little confidence in the electoral process and none in winning socialism through gradual reform. They brought to American and into the Finnish American socialist movement a conviction that only some form of workers' revolutionary action, and not socialist politics alone, could establish socialism.[12]

Leo Laukki and Yrjo Sirola, pursued by the Czarist police because of their respective participation in the Viapori uprising and general strike, were among this group of militant Finns who immediately became involved in American radical movements and in workers' education.[13] For these and many other

---

10 Carl Ross, The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture and Society (New York Mills, Minnesota: Parta Printers, 1977), p. 48.

11 Ibid., p. 49.

12 Ibid., p. 53.

13 Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "From Socialism to Industrial Unionism (IWW): Social Factors in the Emergence of Left-Labor Radicalism Among Finnish Workers on the Mesabi, 1911-19," The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives. eds. Michael G. Karni, Matti E. Kaups, Douglas J. Ollila, Jr. (Turku, Finland: Institute for Migration, 1975), p. 161. Arthur E. Puotinen, "Early Labor Organizations in the Copper Country," For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America, eds. Michael G. Karni, et al., (Superior, Wisconsin: Tyomies Society, 1977), p. 146.

Finnish immigrants, "socialism was...a child of the Old Country. Both its content and its leadership came from Finland."[14]

Thus, when the Finns encountered low pay, long hours, irregular employment, and dangerous job conditions in the mining regions of the Upper Midwest and an ineffectual American Federation of Labor which barred unskilled, immigrant workers from membership, they created the Finnish Socialist Federation which "became the American Socialist Party's first foreign-language federation."[15] In fact, the Finnish Socialist Federation symbolized the model for some 20 other language federations within the Socialist Party by becoming the largest and most powerful group.[16] In 1906, for instance, the Finnish language federation claimed 29 local chapterms with 2,450 members. By 1912, this total had increased to 225 locals and 11,000 members. "At that date, the organization included four newspapers, the Work Peoples' College with 123 students, 76 club houses, 80 libraries, and a combined income of $184,128.83, coupled with an overall valuation of $558,201.14."[17] Indeed, the radical Finns not only represented a formidable force within the American socialist movement but they also made a major impact on the American workers' education movement with the formation of Work Peoples' College.

In September of 1903, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran National Church sponsored the founding of a folk high school--originally located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and later moved to better facilities in Duluth--in order to teach

---

14 John I. Kolehmainen, "The Inimitable Marxists: The Finnish Immigrant Socialists," Michigan History, 36 (1952), p. 399.

15 Ibid., p. 396. For a description of the harsh working conditions of the Finns see Ross, pp. 109-11. Also, Ollila, p. 157, makes a brief commentary about the relationship between the Finns and the AFL.

16 Arne Halonen, "The Role of Finnish-Americans in the Political Labor Movement" (Unpub. Masters thesis: University of Minnesota, 1945), p. 51.

17 Ollila, p. 156.

Finnish immigrants religion, Finnish culture, and nationalism.[18] The school received financial support from stock sold to Finnish shareholders for $1 apiece. A Board of Directors, consisting of lay members and church officials, controlled the secular aspects of the school while the church supervised the school's theological seminary. The clerics, who were anti-socialist, and the socialists, who were anticlerical, continually vied for absolute control over the school. Meanwhile, the majority of the students came from Finnish socialist homes.[19] The students, most of whom were in their late twenties, resented the religious restrictions and courses imposed upon them by the church and, as a result, led a strike to protest the "oppressive" nature of the school in 1904.[20] Conflicts over religion caused classes to be cancelled in 1905. Finally, two years later, Finnish socialists obtained a majority of the stock and assumed complete authority over the school and its board of directors in 1907.

The socialists changed the school's outlook, reorganized the program, and renamed it Work Peoples' College. Since a large percentage of the Finns had little, or no, formal education, the college's first goal concerned itself with providing "basic educational skills, especially in the use of the English language." Secondly, the Finnish socialist community hoped "to develop its own internal leadership, especially editors, teachers, and agitators."[21] The curriculum, which stressed the social sciences, contained history, economics, sociology, geography, bookkeeping, history of socialism,

---

18 Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "The Work People's College: Immigrant Education for Adjustment and Solidarity," For the Common Good, pp. 93-94. Hereafter referred to as WPC.

19 Ibid., p. 94.

20 Ibid., p. 97.

21 Ibid., p. 102 & p. 106. William Hoglund, Finnish Immigrants in America: 1880-1920 (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1960), reveals that over one-third of the students who attended the school in 1913 had no formal education.

Darwinian evolution, English, Finnish, public speaking, and journalism. The school also furnished an English correspondence course for non-resident students.[22] The socialists, therefore, promoted the social democratic ideology and cultivated "the growth of class-consciousness" in response to the "school of Morgan and Rockefeller," as the radical Finns "were fond of calling American capitalism."[23] Leo Laukki joined the teaching staff and later became director. With 42 students and two instructors, the 1908 school year, for a change, proceeded smoothly. By the 1913-14 academic year, the college enrolled 157 students, employed eight instructors, and expanded its facilities into a second building.[24] Yet, this success did not prevent Work Peoples' College from experiencing another ideological shift.

In 1914, Finnish socialists experienced the same internal political turmoil and organizational fragmentation as the American Socialist Party endured in 1912. As a result, practically all of the Minnesota Finnish Socialists resigned or were released from the Federation, and they subsequently affiliated directly or indirectly with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and supported its goal of uniting all workers into "One Big Union."[25] In other words, most Midwestern Finns, along with the radical socialists, supported the IWW principles of "revolutionary unionism, direct action, sabotage, and the general strike" rather than parliamentary socialism as the means of ameliorating working-class problems.[26] Meanwhile, most Eastern Finns and moderate socialists elected to remain in the American Socialist Party.

---

22 WPC, p. 102 and Hansome, p. 208.

23 WPC, p. 102. Michael G. Karni, "The Founding of the Finnish Socialist Federation and the Minnesota Strike of 1907," For the Common Good, p. 82.

24 WPC, pp. 102-9.

25 Ollila, p. 157.

26 WPC, p. 110.

Work Peoples' College, as well, drifted leftward to industrial unionism under the leadership of Leo Laukki and Yrjo Sirola, who taught at the school and strongly embraced the IWW precepts. With the arrest and imprisonment of Laukki in 1917 as part of the Chicago 166, the school's attendance faltered and eventually dropped to 53 students in 1919.[27] Laukki ultimately skipped bail when he left the United States, with Sirola, to participate in the Bolshevik takeover in Russia. When the IWW recognized the Work Peoples' College in 1921 as its official school, enrollment increased to 70 students.[28]

The Work Peoples' College "Announcement of Courses" for the 1923-24 year delineated the school's revolutionary orientation and adherence to IWW goals:

> This school recognizes the existence of class struggle in society, and its courses of study have been prepared so that industrially organized workers, both men and women, dissatisfied with conditions under our capitalist system, can more efficiently carry on an organized class struggle for the attainment of industrial demands, and ultimately the realization of a new social order.[29]

These principles remained in effect for the next 20 years of the school's life.

As a People's college, the school fashioned its program to fulfill the IWW outlook by offering academic subjects such as the Materialistic Conception of History, with several texts by Marx and Engels; History of the Labor Movement in the United States; the Motives of Social Activity; Economic

---

27 William D. Haywood, Big Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood. (New York: International Publishers, 1974), p. 363.

28 WPC, p. 111. We might note that the Finnish Communist Party's folk high school in central Finland is today named in honor of Sirola.

29 "Work Peoples' College Announcement of Courses, 1923-23," (Duluth, Minnesota: Work Peoples' College, 1923), p. 2.

Theory: Modern Industry; Industrial Geography; Evolutionary Biology; and Elementary and Advanced Arithmetic. Practical courses consisted of Public Speaking which prepared students to "lecture on subjects of propaganda value." Debating argued important labor questions, such as the importance of "industrial unionism." Reporting and Editing gave students firsthand experience in "writing news articles on local events, editorials, and essays on important matters in the labor movement." IWW papers and journals ofter published the best student articles, while the College used IWW literature throughout its program. Elementary and Advanced Bookkeeping prepared students to maintain the financial records of IWW locals.[30] Typing represented an important tool for potential IWW organizers because it could be used to prepare leaflets or other forms of communication.[31] Spelling and English Grammar functioned as basic courses for less literate students. The College also attempted to develop its own instructors by instituting a teacher-training program during special summer sessions held at the school.[32]

In addition, Work Peoples' College had scripts for some 200 plays and furnished an active play-rental service.[33] Rosa Knuuti, an instructor, projected a twofold purpose for dramas:

> The theatre to my mind is a means to an end. Classified as art, it concerns itself in providing entertainment; as propaganda, it provides something to think about.[34]

---

30 Ibid., pp. 4-7.

31 From a photocopy of a letter written on WPC letterhead by Fred W. Thompson, dated Dec. 1st., 1929. Obtained from Minnesota Historical Society.

32 Kristen Svanum, "The Work People's College: Where Industrial Unionists are Efficiently Educated," Industrial Pioneer, 2 (1925), p. 48.

33 Gust Aakula, "Short Sketches of the Features of Työväen Opisto, Work Peoples' College, Duluth, Minnesota." Undated & unpub. manuscript obtained from the Duluth Public Library. Gust was a former student, teacher, and secretary-treasurer of the school.

34 Rosa A. Knuuti, "The Workers' Play," Industrial Pioneer, 3 (1925), p. 26.

For Knuuti, bourgeois plays romanticized working-class life by portraying a friendly relationship between labor and capital. In this way, entertainment served as subtle propaganda. Knuuti, however, saw the need for workers' plays which exposed the drab existence and harsh realities of working-class life. Consequently, labor dramas would supply thought-provoking entertainment framed in class-conflict assumptions.[35]

While all the courses were elective, students were required to follow a fairly rigorous schedule which included 20 class hours a week. According to Clifford Ellis, another teacher at the College, the school day began at eight o'clock in the morning and continued until noon. Students spent the remainder of the day in debates or in the school library.[36] Students also influenced educational matters through recommendations made to the board of directors on the Friday night business meetings.[37]

Enrollment generally fluctuated between 50 and 70 students during the 1920's and early 1930's.[38] The students included miners from the Mesabi Range, western lumberjacks, migrant farmers, kitchenmaids, eastern textile workers, sheepherders, craftsmen, and cowboys.[39] Moreover, after its affiliation with the IWW in 1921, Work Peoples' College began to admit many non-Finnish students and the school lost much of its ethnic character.

---

35 Ibid.

36 Clifford B. Ellis, "What Life Means to a Worker: The Story of the Past Winter Semester at the Work Peoples' College," Industrial Pioneer, 4 (1926), 14-18.

37 Hansome, pp. 211-12.

38 WPC, p. 111.

39 Rosa Knuuti, "The Work Peoples' College," Industrial Pioneer, 1 (1921), p. 60. Also, see Ellis, p. 14.

Thus, as early as 1907, the Finns, using a folk high school model, established a viable example of workers' education in the United States and, in spite of turmoil and conflict, the school addressed many of the educational and social needs of the Finnish-American workers by providing a radical ideology and curriculum. Moreover, when Work Peoples' College became formally affiliated with the IWW in 1921, it addressed the need for national reforms and served non-Finnish students as well.

The American Labor College Movement

While public schools in theory provided opportunity for social mobility through education, the majority of U. S. working-class children, in fact, could not attend school. A 1912 survey of children employed in factories reported that instead of attending school children worked in order to contribute to the economic welfare of their families. Their fathers either earned low wages; were unemployed; incapacitated; or, worse yet, dead because of a job-related accident.[40] As a consequence, some "65 percent of the children in the common schools in 1914 dropped out by the end of the fifth or sixth grade."[41] Nor did the vocational education movement, which was heavily promoted during this period, do much to relieve this situation. Rather, this educational experience further limited social mobility for these students because when they graduated, or dropped out, they were only equipped with working-class skills, which earned them, at best, a working-class job.[42] Thus, as Katz argues, the public schools "did not alleviate poverty" or "significantly alter the social structure."[43]

---

40 Helen M. Todd, "Why Children Work: The Children's Answer," McClure's Magazine, 40 (1912), p. 69.

41 S. Alexander Rippa, Education in a Free Society: An American History (New York: David McKay Co., 1976), p. 159.

42 Michael B. Katz, Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 121.

43 Ibid., p. 149.

Formed in 1886 as a confederation of craft unions and representing the largest labor organization in the United States during the early decades of the 20th Century, the American Federation of Labor only recruited skilled workers. As an elite worker organization, the AFL also inhibited social progress for the majority of the workers because it excluded women, blacks, and immigrants who dominated the unskilled ranks of American labor and who constituted the majority of workers.[44] In 1920, for example, scarcely 19 percent of the 26,000,000 total wage earners could claim membership in some type of labor organization,[45] and the AFL only accounted for a portion of this percentage.

Working-class frustration with restrictions on social and economic mobility did much to generate the Socialist Party of America in 1901. According to Eugene V. Debs, the organization's foremost spokesperson, the Party stood "for abolition of the wage system... for the collective ownership of the means of wealth production and distribution and the operation of industry in the interest of all."[46] The Party attempted to reach its radical goals through the electoral process and it achieved considerable success in its endeavors. In the 1912 election, Debs obtained six percent of the total presidential vote. Concurrently, Party candidates controlled a record number of public offices with "some 1,200 in 340 municipalities from coast to coast, among them 79 mayors in 24 states."[47]

Many socialists, moreover, became active in the American labor college movement which blossomed during the 1920's. While numerous

---

44 Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 82.

45 Leo Wolman, The Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880-1923 (1924; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1975), p. 85.

46 Eugene V. Debs, Eugene V. Debs Speaks, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), p. 110.

47 James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), pp. 93-103.

labor colleges existed, Brookwood Labor College, founded in 1921 in Katonah, New York, and Commonwealth College, organized in 1925 near Mena, Arkansas, typified the largest, most prominent, and most durable illustrations of the labor college movement. Many subsequent examples, such as the Seattle Labor College, either attempted to replicate Brookwood, or were actual offshoots of the school.[48] A. J. Muste of the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America; James H. Maurer, Socialist President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor; and Kate Richards O'Hare, Socialist Vice-Presidential Candidate in 1920 with Debs, represented the more prominent radicals responsible for the creation of Brookwood and Commonwealth.

Except for the ethnic influence of the Finns, the conditions which bred the American labor college movement were not unlike the circumstances that produced Work Peoples' College. That is, educational deficiencies in the public schools, dissatisfaction with organized labor, and social discontent all contributed to the creation of Work Peoples' College, of Brookwood Labor College, and of Commonwealth College. These concerns are clearly present in the 1932-33 Brookwood Bulletin, where this labor college set its goals:

> Brookwood thinks of itself as a part of the labor movement of America and of the world. Brookwood thinks of the labor movement both as a practical instrument by which workers achieve higher wages, shorter hours, and better conditions of work, and as a great social force having as its ultimate goal the good life for all men in a social order free from exploitation and based upon control by the workers. . . . Brookwood frankly aims to inspire and train its students for activity in a militant labor movement.[49]

In a 1934 article which appeared in Progressive Education, Lucien Koch, director of Commonwealth, summarized Commonwealth's goals as "educating leaders for a new society."[50] In both statements the socialist influence is

---

[48] Irving Bernstein, The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. 416.

[49] Bulletin and Announcement of Courses for 1932-33 (Katonah, New York: Brookwood Labor College, 1932), p. 3.

[50] Lucien Koch, "Commonwealth College," Progressive Education, 11 (1934), p. 302. This same phrase appears on the masthead of the school's paper, The Commonwealth Fortnightly.

evident. Like Work People's College, Brookwood and Commonwealth also strove for the establishment of a new social order and sought to train militant and effective labor leaders. These schools, in marked contrast to most American colleges, sought to facilitate basic social change advantageous to the working class.

The labor college program, as with Work Peoples' College, clearly reflected the ideals and goals of socialist reformers. For resident students, Brookwood provided a one-year course which consisted of American History; History of the American Labor Movement and Trade Union Organization; Foreign Labor History; Modern Industry; Advanced Economics; Labor Journalism; Public Speaking; Workers' Education; Preparation for Field Work; Labor Drama; and Psychology.[51] The second-year course was open to Brookwood students who had completed their first year of studies and regular college students interested in workers' education or "desirous of training in labor history, trade unions, etc., in a labor school."[52] Rather than a regular classroom format, the second-year students met individually with instructors or participated in group conferences or seminars. For non-resident students, Brookwood offered short courses, summer sessions, extension programs, and a variety of publications. Commonwealth's three-year program emphasized four major areas "grouped around workers' education, labor economics, labor journalism, or labor law."[53] In general, then, the ideological emphasis as well as the course offerings of Brookwood and Commonwealth closely paralleled the Work Peoples' College program. As in Scandinavian folk high schools, these peoples' colleges gave degrees or grades to their students. In contrast to Work Peoplse' College, however, the majority of Brookwood and Commonwealth instructors were college graduates.[54]

---

51 Brookwood Bulletin, pp. 8-10.

52 Ibid., p. 10.

53 "Suggested Three-Year Course of Study," Commonwealth College Fortnightly, 1 December 1931, p. 3.

54 Ibid., Hansome, p. 205.

Brookwood and Commonwealth also placed great emphasis on labor dramas. The students performed their own compositions or portrayed plays written by professional playwrights.[55] As outlined by A. J. Muste, director of Brookwood, the play served several functions:

> It may be a means of self-expression, making the Labor Movement more vital to the workers themselves; it may interpret the Labor Movement for the public in more sympathetic and appealing terms than abstract reasoning can do; it may be a means of entertainment, particularly in isolated regions where the pool room and the blind tiger are the only means of diversion.[56]

The students staged their dramas for other students at the schools and for workers in union halls. Brookwood students even managed to present a play on Broadway.[57] As might be expected, Muste's views of workers' plays did not differ substantially from Rosa Knuut's perceptions at Work Peoples' College.

Course loads and classroom methodology did vary considerably among the schools. While Brookwood placed no restrictions on course load, its Bulletin stipulated that each student had to contribute ten hours of work a week to the school community by doing "repair work, house cleaning, dishwashing, waiting on table(s), clerical and library assistance.[58] A student work committee assigned the various work duties. Commonwealth, in contrast, limited course work to 12 hours per week while requiring 20 hours of work.[59]

---

[55] Koch, p. 301.

[56] Quoted in Helen G. Norton, "Drama At Brookwood," Labor Age, 15 (May 1926), pp. 18-19.

[57] "Students Working on Labor Projects," Commonwealth College Fortnightly, 1 November 1932, p. 1.

[58] Brookwood Bulletin, pp. 14-15.

[59] "Commonwealth Announcement: 1927-1928 Calendar," Commonwealth College Fortnightly, 1 March 1927, p. 4.

William Cunningham, a Commonwealth teacher, described a typical day at the school consisting of classroom work from 7:30 a.m. until lunchtime:

> At one o'clock the dishwashing crew is doing the dinner things, the laundry crew has a fire built under its water heater, the wood crew is trudging toward the timber with axes and saws in hand, the carpenter crew is climbing a scaffolding, the office crew is pounding out answers to letters of inquiry from all over the world.[60]

The work routine, both at Brookwood and Commonwealth, formed an integral part of the educational process, and lessons often continued while teachers and students chopped wood or washed dishes together. In the evenings, students often gathered at the instructor's cottage, or room, to pursue their studies or share their experiences and dreams for a new society founded on social justice.[61]

In contrast to Work Peoples' College, Brookwood and Commonwealth encouraged students to organize and to participate in off-campus strike activities as part of their educational experience. For example, some Brookwood students and teachers became involved in the long and brutal Marion, North Carolina, textile strike of 1929.[62] "In August 1934," a Commonwealth instructor "went to Corinth, Mississippi, with three student apprentices, in a response to a telegram from an Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union official pleading for organizers."[63]

Brookwood and Commonwealth students, like their counterparts at Work Peoples' College, actively participated in school affairs. Brookwood students not only elected two representatives to the school's 19-member board of

---

60 William Cunningham, "Commonwealth College--An Educational Mutant," World Tomorrow, 12 (1929), p. 504.

61 Raymond and Charlotte Koch, Educational Commune: The Story of Commonwealth College (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 10. Hereafter cited as Educational Commune.

62 Bernstein, p. 30.

63 Educational Commune, p. 137.

directors, but also maintained a seat on the school's executive committee and assumed responsibility for "student discipline, controlled student activities, and exercises advisory powers in educational matters."[64] After two years, Commonwealth students became members of the Commonwealth College Association which "owned and controlled the college property."[65]

The labor college libraries were well-stocked with socialist literature and served important roles. The Commonwealth library, for instance, contained some 8,000 volumes which included a "vast collection of labor, sociological and economic digests, texts, and other works."[66] In addition, Commonwealth boasted of its "Museum of Social Change" which demonstrated the oppressive relationship between the capitalists and the working class through the display of "tear-gas bombs and bloody lynch ropes, and depression clothing made of old sacking."[67]

Brookwood and Commonwealth, like Work Peoples' College, constructed their programs in deference to the precepts of the schools and the background of the students. Enrollment seldom exceeded 60 students which ensured a low teacher-student ratio. Students were generally in their twenties; from families of industrial laborers, farmers, or miners; and brought experiences and viewpoints from different parts of the country and the world.[68] As

---

64 Brookwood Bulletin, p. 15.

65 Cunningham, op. cit.

66 Richard Deverall, "Commonwealth College: How the Communists Run a Labor College in the Ozarks and the Lesson to be Learned From It," Commonweal, 30 (1939), pp. 9-11.

67 "Commonwealth: New Museum Shows Collapse of Capitalism," Newsweek, 16 February 1935, p. 27.

68 "Growth of Brookwood," Brookwood Review, 15 December 1925, p. 8. "Meet New Commoners," Commonwealth College Fortnightly, 1 November 1926, p. 1, and "Here's a Peek at New Student Group," Fortnightly, 15 November 1926, p. 1.

might be expected, most labor college students had little formal schooling. Over 50 percent of the 1927 Brookwood class, for example, had only completed the eighth grade.[69]

Although Brookwood and Commonwealth offered a more elaborate program than Work Peoples' College, the programs for all three schools were more similar than dissimilar. That is, these labor colleges fashioned their programs to fit their ideals. The academic subjects, dramas, strike activities, libraries, and other adjuncts, such as Commonwealth's museum, all depicted the deplorable conditions of the American working class within the confines of the capitalist system. While these programs sought first the critical awareness of working-class youth, they also attempted to provide each student with the tools necessary to work toward improving the social condition of the working class through collective struggle. Here democratic settings encouraged a cooperative feeling which transferred to the development of fraternal attitudes among workers who belonged to a common union and to a radically new social arrangement. The liberals' goals of liberty and equality were not enough. For a workers' society, fraternity or community would also be essential.

Achievements

During its existence, Work Peoples' College attained considerable success. It supplied thousands of graduates who became "active in the political, union, and cooperative moevements" of the Finns as "organizers, newspapermen, speakers, and propagandists for the Finnish industrial union movement."[70]

John Viita, for example, was an important editor of Socialisti, and later Työmies, and offered outstanding leadership in the

---

69 Hansome, p. 204.

70 Kristen Svanum, "The Work Peoples College," Industrial Pioneer, 3 (1925), p. 16. Hereafter cited as College.

> Finnish-American labor movement. He was trained at the school along with others who offered direction to the IWW movement, such as August Wesley, Gust Aakula, Ivar Vapaa, George Humon, Fred Jaakkola, Matti Kainu, and Jack Ujanen.[71]

Thus, Work Peoples' College not only grew from the Marxist inspiration and leadership which came from Finland, but it also supplemented it by developing new leaders in the United States.[72]

Brookwood graduates, likewise, served important roles in the labor movement. "In the course of more than 15 years of activity, Brookwood trained 500 persons" who occupied responsible positions in labor and social movements as organizers, business agents, labor journalists, union officials, and labor educators.[73] Some of the more specific careers of Brookwood graduates included:

> ...two Reuther Brothers, Victor and Roy, Julius Hochman, a vice-president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Rose Pessota, an ILGWU organizer active in the Akron sit-downs, and Clinton S. Golden, who with other Brookwood graduates was active in the founding of the Steelworkers.[74]

Frank Winn and Nat Weinburg, other Brookwood graduates, worked with the Reuthers in their UAW campaigns of the late 1930's and early 1940's.[75] Moreover, "Brookwood trained an impressive number of people who played a leading role in the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations."[76]

---

[71] WPC, p. 107. Socialisti and Tyomies represented two important radical Finnish publications. For further background see P. George Hummasti, "'The Working Man's Daily Bread,' Finnish-American Working Class Newspapers, 1900-1921," For the Common Good.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Marius Hansome, "The Development of Workers' Education," Workers' Education in the United States, ed. Theodore Brameld (New York, 1941), p. 60. Hereafter cited as Development. Also see Hansome (1931), p. 204.

[74] Thomas R. Brooks, Toil and Trouble: A History of American Labor (New York: Delta Books, 1964), p. 154.

[75] Victor G. Reuther, The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW (Boston: Houston Mifflin Co., 1976), p. 136 & p. 259.

[76] Brooks, loc. cit.

The November 15, 1932, issue of the Commonwealth Fortnightly reported that several of its former students had organized a workers' theatre; worked at Hull House in Chicago; and participated in unemployed councils and demonstrations, hunger marches, and farmers' movements. The article concluded by stating:

> In many instances besides the above, Commonwealth learns that its former students are working for the cause of the common people in the spheres of activity where they can be of most use to the labor movement. [77]

Certainly this represents only a small sample of the many labor college graduates, but even the accomplishments of these few students cannot be denied. Clearly, the labor college program, as initiated by Work Peoples' College, produced graduates who became active in the American labor movement. It is equally clear that the labor college movement failed in its larger goal of social reconstruction.

Outcomes

Because of its links with the IWW and the Finnish ethnic community, the fate of Work Peoples' College became inextricably enmeshed with these two groups. When the IWW opposed American participation in World War I, government officials, along with many citizen groups consisting of local businessmen, continually harassed IWW locals and their leaders. Finally, with the mass arrest of 166 IWW leaders in 1917, the political appeal of the IWW and of Work Peoples' College began to decline during the 1920's. The acculturation of the Finns during this same period caused further problems for the school. Put simply, second-generation, English-speaking Finns were not attracted to Work Peoples' College. They preferred to attend the American public schools instead of a school for immigrants. Also,

---

[77] "Former Students Active in Movement," Commonwealth Fortnightly, (15 November 1932), p. 1

younger Finns avoided Work Peoples' College because they "were often deeply ashamed of their immigrant parents' radicalism."[78] Nonetheless, Work Peoples' College died stubbornly. Although the school ceased operations in 1940, the board of directors continued to maintain the school's financial assets until 1963 "when all of the college funds were finally dispersed."[79]

Outraged over criticisms by Brookwood of the complacent attitude and weak actions of the American Federation, Matthew Woll, Vice-President of the AFL and acting President of the National Civic Federation, bitterly denounced Brookwood as a communist institution during the 1928 AFL Convention held in New Orleans. The charges were made in spite of the fact that only one Brookwood instructor, Arthur Calhoun, was considered a Communist. The accusations became further exaggerated when Brookwood's antagonists labeled the school as "anti-religious" and a "free love colony." The AFL Executive Council handled the case in an unscrupulous manner since Brookwood was not forewarned of the charges, denied access to the incriminating evidence, or even given an opportunity to refute the accusations. John Dewey, a progressive educator, sharply criticized Woll and the AFL for their underhanded actions.[80] In the ensuing conflict, Brookwood lost not only prestige; the school also suffered the withdrawal of funds and support by unions affiliated with the Federation.[81] In 1932, because of a financial crisis at the college, Brookwood reduced its staff and student body and

---

[78] WPC, pp. 111-12

[79] "Time Passes Duluthian, College," Duluth Herald, 8 March 1967. The "Duluthian" mentioned in the title of the article was Gust Asjula. The news article contains a picture of Gust standing in front of the building which once housed Work Peoples' College; it's now an apartment building.

[80] John Dewey, "Labor Politics and Labor Education," New Republic, 57 (1929), pp. 211-214.

[81] See Labor Age, Oct.-Nov., 1928, for background of the AFL-Brookwood controversy.

cut back its extension program. Its demise was predictable. John Dewey, Sinclair Lewis, and others solicited donations for Brookwood through an article which appeared in the Nation.[82] However, it was too little and too late. Brookwood somehow managed to survive until 1937.

Commonwealth also experienced many attacks from a variety of opponents. The first onslaught occurred as early as 1926 when the Arkansas American Legion accused the college of affiliating with communists and receiving secret donations from the Soviet Union. With the help of the Arkansas Federation of Labor and J. Edgar Hoover's disclaimer of the Soviet connection, Commonwealth weathered this first storm.[83] Later, in 1935 and in 1937, Commonwealth became the subject of investigations by the Arkansas Legislature. A Baptist minister, the Ku Klux Klan, and employers opposed to Commonwealth's support of union activities had persuaded the legislature to initiate these inquiries. Accused of seditious activity, sexual perversion, and godlessness, Commonwealth only endured because of the intervention of notables, such as Jane Addams and H. L. Mencken.[84] Fortunately, Commonwealth "continued to receive donations from such supporters as...Harvard's Law Dean Roscoe Pound and economist Summer Schlicter, labor historian John Commons, H. L. Mencken, John Dewey, Justice Louis D. Brandeis, and Albert Einstein."[85] Yet, constant

---

[82] John Dewey, et al., "Correspondence Help for Brookwood," Nation, 135 (1932), p. 592.

[83] Educational Commune, pp. 72-3.

[84] "The Arkansas Legislature Shows Good Sense," Christian Century, 52 (1935), pp. 501-2, and "Attack on Commonwealth Renewed," American Teacher, 21 (Jan.-Feb. 1937), pp. 28-9.

[85] Donald H. Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), pp. 71-2.

harassment by anti-communist and anti-labor elements finally forced Commonwealth to close in 1941 on false charges of prominently exhibiting the unlawful symbol of a hammer and a sickle; disseminating propaganda which encouraged the overthrow of the United States Government; and not displaying the American flag on campus.[86]

Conclusions

The folk education traditions and the radical orientation of many Finnish immigrants precipitated Work Peoples' College, a forerunner of the American labor college movement. With a purpose and program similar to Brookwood and Commonwealth, Work Peoples' College reached its apex when the American workers' education movement was just beginning. Indeed, by the late 1920's, Work Peoples' College symbolized "one of the oldest workers' educational enterprises in America."[87] Moreover, Work Peoples' College produced labor leaders and activists almost 15 years before Brookwood and Commonwealth were even conceived. Finally, the fact that Work Peoples' College survived for a longer period of time than its counterparts further attests to its significance and vitality. The Finns, drawing upon the Scandinavian "fighting" folk high school model, recreated this pattern of workers' education in the United States.[88]

What can be learned from this experience? Quite simply, non-formal education which effectively opposes the prevailing social groups will not be tolerated in the United States no matter what amount of political freedom is claimed to exist. This was demonstrated by the fact the ideological foundation of each of these schools suffered direct attack. Leo Laukki, the director of Work Peoples' College, was arrested and convicted in 1917 along with 166 other

[86] Educational Commune, pp. 207-8.

[87] Hansome, p. 207.

[88] College, p. 16.

IWW leaders. Work Peoples' College had flourished to this point. Thereafter, its popularity and enrollment gradually receded. Brookwood, likewise, received irreparable harm from the AFL's star-chamber tactics. Again, Brookwood had achieved some success and planned a $2,000,000 expansion of its facilities when the Federation's attack occurred.[89]

In summation, the political damage that Work Peoples' College experienced in 1917 should have been fair warning to the founders and supporters of Brookwood and Commonwealth. That is, when schools of this type are young and not too successful, they may be tolerated. But, when the schools mature, achieve some success in their endeavors, and plan to expand their activities, they threaten the economic and social elite. The solution is simple; destroy the schools and/or the ideology that they stand for. In marked contrast, labor-movement folk high schools created in Scandinavia with grudging financial assistance from Conservative governments before World War I continue to operate with state support. While these schools are now more concerned with defending labor privilege than as earlier with injustice and class struggle, their survival says a good deal about the quality of Scandinavian societies and of their concern for cooperation, participation, and democratic processes.

---

[89]"Labor College Seeks $2,000,000," New York Times, 8 February 1928, p. 16. col. 6.